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Desire and the Expressive Eye

Introduction: Desire and the "Expressive Eye"

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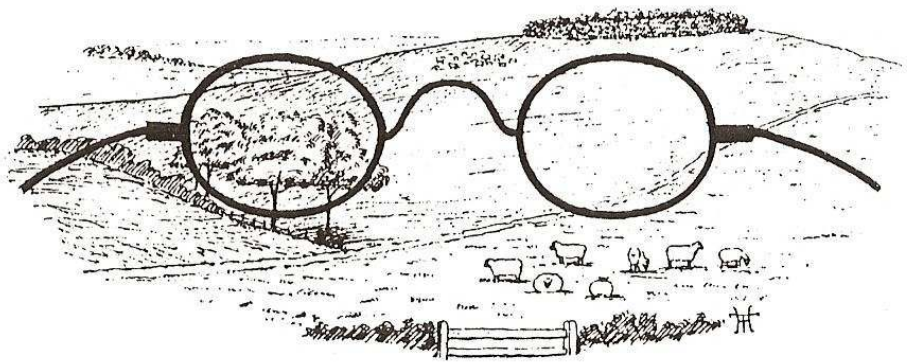
EDITOR'S NOTE

Several articles from this issue are being published jointly by FATHOM and the *Hardy Review* as part of a collaborative work.



“In a Eweleaze Near Weatherbury” (*Illustrations* 154)

1 Hardy’s famous drawing of a pair of glasses superimposed on a pastoral landscape, an illustration for the poem “In a Eweleaze near Weatherbury”, is chosen by Catherine Lanone as her starting-point in the essay she wrote for this volume. What better illustration could be found for our subject, whose problematics is the connection between desire and the gaze? Indeed the onlooker requires glasses to see the landscape better: are we not all afflicted by some kind of structural myopia, or “misvision”? Does not the Bible repeatedly assert that we have eyes, but cannot see? (see Jeremiah 5:21, Ezekiel 12:2,

Mark 4:12 and 8:18). We cannot see, but we *want* to see. We want to open the gate in the foreground of the drawing and have access to what is represented. We want to rub the painting, like Hardy's collector in "The Collector Cleans his Picture" (a poem studied here by Émilie Loriaux). The desire to see is what psychoanalysis calls the scopic drive.

2 But then, as we gaze at Hardy's drawing, we are suddenly aware of a possibility: that the picture could be looking back at us, through the peeping-holes of the glasses. Several critics, quoted by Lanone in this volume, have commented on the drawing. Zietlow has pointed out that the glasses do not seem to have lenses, for the vision through them is not modified (Zietlow 4). They cannot assist defective eye-sight. As Linda M. Shires suggests, "maybe it is the present landscape that looks at us, the viewers, through lenses, rather than the reverse" (Shires 142). That analysis is all the more convincing as the arms of the glasses could be pointing either way, towards the onlooker, or towards the landscape. Worn by us, the spectacles might be a help to the human eye. Worn by a viewer at the back of the landscape, they might produce the uncanny effect of the Other's gaze darting forth in our direction. Just as Linda M. Shires notes the instability of "eye" and "I", Lanone in her essay suggests reading the "ewe" as a "you" – the "lost addressee", which is missing in the poem. The "you-leaze" could then be attempting to return our gaze, with the optical aid of the spectacles – which in this case would prove just as ineffective as they are for the viewer, or for the poet.

3 If the viewer is exposed to the Other's gaze, it can also be argued that the eye of the Other is precisely the object of the viewer's desire. That beyond the representation of the meek ewes grazing on the leaze, what we really want to see is the "you", the Other looking at us. Is not human desire a desire for the Other? (see Lacan 1966, 628: "Le désir de l'homme est le désir de l'Autre"). But of course, that desire can never be fulfilled, as the defective glasses clearly indicate, in whichever way one views them. The spectacles are sorely needed, but they do not work. Deprived of lenses, they are just an empty frame, and their equivocal representation – the "visual redundancy" noted by Laurence Estanove (Estanove n.p.) – makes them appear as holes in the picture. A blind spot in the field of vision prevents the viewer's eye from reaching the Other, and the Other's gaze from reaching him – which is rather fortunate, all things considered. From her reading of the drawing and of the poem, Lanone infers that the spectacles represent "the distance between the seeing and the scene, [...] the split between the eye and the gaze", in other words the Lacanian "object-gaze" (see Lacan 1973, Lacan 1986) – an analysis to which I wholly subscribe.

4 There are of course many different ways of formulating that idea, with or without Lacan. Most of the articles in this volume revolve around the idea, each in its own perspective, in sundry attempts to approach the question of desire in its relation to the gaze. Brilliantly condensed in Hardy's drawing, the notion of an irreducible distance separating the "eye / I" looking at the picture from the "you / ewe" staring back at the eye is essential to our reading of Hardy, and we must not lose sight of it as we proceed through this volume on "Desire and the Expressive Eye". "Distance" is indeed the most relevant word in any attempt to describe the relation between the desiring viewer and the unattainable object he aims at. "Distance as the source of desire", and "desire as the energy behind attempts to turn distance into closeness", to quote Joseph Hillis Miller's famous phrasing (Miller xii). Words may differ from one essay to another: one may speak of "distance", or of a "gap", a "split", but the idea is the same, and we have to start there in order to study desire in the scopic field.

5 In "Desire and impaired eyesight: Thomas Hardy's clinical metaphors of affect", **Catherine Lanone** considers various clinical terms used by Hardy in several poems, then in Hardy's fiction. Most of those terms refer to optical devices that attempt "to turn distance into closeness". Focusing first on the "uncorrective glasses" of "In a Ewelease Near Weatherbury", on the "emotional myopia" of the poet whose vision is at pains to recapture the lost past, she turns to "The House of Silence" and "At Castle Boterel", introducing the idea of *seeing through*, as through an X-Ray device that could reveal the "bare bones" of the past. "Eyes couched of misvision" is a metaphor at the core of "The Spell of the Rose": it is as though Emma's death had the power to cure Hardy of the emotional cataract that had blurred his vision during the years of dissent, and to restore clear-sightedness like a surgical operation. In her reading of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Lanone continues the paradigm of impaired vision, with the *gutta serena* that afflicts Bathsheba, the partial vision that first kindles Gabriel's desire when he peeps at Bathsheba, Joseph Poorgrass's "multiplying eye", Boldwood's blood-shot eyes (an expression to be taken literally) that cause him to turn a blind eye to the world, etc.

6 With the dark lantern carried by Bathsheba, whose shutter normally makes it possible to either mask or diffuse light, we come to a different approach: the lantern here is not an optical device correcting misvision, but one that suddenly emits a dazzling brilliance, which reveals to Bathsheba that she is hooked to a man "brilliant in brass and scarlet". In this instance, the distance of desire is annulled – temporarily. As Lanone puts it, Bathsheba is literally "caught" by the gaze of the Other, by Troy's "point-blank" eyes.

7 At this point we switch to a different perspective: from a consummation to be wished, the Other's gaze turns into something to be dreaded. In an eye-to-eye relation, which tends to abolish the distance between the viewer and the viewed, the Other's gaze becomes the "evil eye", full of voracity, endowed with a Medusean power, the power to petrify or to kill. Then some kind of shield, like Perseus', is necessary for its lethaI power to be deflected, or warded off. That is exactly what Clym says as the *The Return of the Native* draws to a close: "In the words of Job, 'I have made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?'" (Hardy 1990, 402). A "covenant" with one's eyes is necessary for tragedy to be ended, which means that some kind of law has to be restored if the gaze is to be tamed and its evil influence corrected. Lanone ends with the sad story of "The Blinded Bird", a poem that calls for a reading in animal studies, but also raises the question of the connection between voice and gaze: what if voice could only be heard because we have eyes but cannot see *all*? That is what Žižek says: "*we hear things because we cannot see everything*" (Žižek 93; original emphasis). And that is also what the villagers in *The Return of the Native* seem to believe, as the last lines of the novel might suggest: only a man "who could not see" (to do anything else) could take to preaching on Blackbarrow hill. Could Clym's impaired vision be the reason why his voice can resonate on the heath?

8 Several essays in this volume deal with the question of the gaze as potentially evil. Animal studies is the line followed by **Anna West**, in "Looking at Adders in *The Return of the Native* " – but the article goes far beyond the perspectives opened by that field of studies, for it is also a close reading of a literary text. Starting with the face-to-face and eye-to-eye encounter between Mrs Yeobright and the adder, West wonders why Mrs Yeobright averts her eyes in order not to see the adder looking at her. Beyond the readings that view the adder as a metaphor for Eustacia – the adder's eyes being a replica of Eustacia's ill-wishing eyes – and that situate the scene in the context of local superstitions on "overlooking" and "ill-wishing", the author argues that animals looking back at humans

threaten "the hegemony of human vision", and so place humans in a position of exposure that they seek to avoid. Animals are not just metaphors in a literary fiction, they exist *literally*, they are a flesh-and-blood reality in the story, like their human counterparts. West quotes Derrida who feels "naked under the gaze of his cat" and sees the animal looking at him as the "absolute other", a figure of "absolute alterity". The essay moves on to the idea that the adder's gaze deconstructs the narrator's omniscient gaze, for it introduces the possibility of multiple viewpoints.

9 **Annie Ramel**, in "The Medusean Eye in Thomas Hardy", follows a similar train of thought as she focuses on the extreme case of gazes that prove mortal because they stare the viewers in the face. When the distance of desire is abolished, "the energy behind attempts to turn distance into closeness" turns lethal. The article is based on Lacan's theory of the gaze. It opposes two scenes in *Far from the Madding Crowd*: Oak surveying the scene of the "pastoral tragedy" that has annihilated his sheep and his hopes, and Boldwood staring at the red seal of the Valentine. In the first example, the frontal view of the pond which glitters like a dead man's eye is avoided by Oak having to look awry to read the picture as a vanity. Whereas Boldwood's eyes become one with the red seal of the Valentine, which turns into a bloodstain on his retina, till he faces his own uncanny image in the mirror – a death's head which is both alien to him and his very double. Here, the Other's gaze, which is not distinct from his own gaze, stares him in the face and has a lethal power. The author studies two scenes in *The Return of the Native* where the same logic prevails, and reads "The Withered Arm" in that perspective. It concludes by revisiting the traditional beliefs in "overlooking" and "the evil eye".

10 With **Emilie Loriaux**'s "Unconscious Desires in 'The Collector Cleans his Picture'", the "evil eye" is not so much the Other's gaze as the subject's own eye: the parson-antiquarian telling his story seems to have little regard for the command implied by the biblical quotation under the title of the poem, in which God takes away from Ezechiel (24:16) "the desire of [his] eyes": "*Fili hominis, ecce ego tollo a te desiderabile oculorum tuorum in plaga;* Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke". Impelled by an irresistible desire to see, he freely indulges his curiosity as he cleans a canvas covered with layers of grime until he discovers the picture of a Venus and finds himself "drunk with the lure of love's inhibited dreamings". But lo and behold, the lure of love turns into the lascivious "leer" of a hag, whose finger points slantwise to the horror of "a bosom eaten away of a rot from the lusts of a life-time". Loriaux reads the poem, in which is encased an *ekphrasis* of the picture, with a detailed and sensitive attention paid to the poetics of the text, as well as to the textual differences between the successive manuscript versions. She also discusses the central question of art's relation to truth: is art a means "to produce by a false thing the effect of a true" (Hardy 1989, 226), or is it sheer illusion? Is the picture a lure, or does it reveal the parson's inhibited fears and desires? Loriaux notes that the parson goes back to his normal duties at the end of the poem: order is finally restored, it seems that the parson has, in conformity with God's command in Ezechiel, and like Clym, "made a covenant with [his] eyes".

11 In her essay on "Machination Versus Mechanization: Desire in Thomas Hardy's 'On the Western Circuit'", **Trish Ferguson** approaches the subject from the opposite stance: desire is not seen as a potentially lethal drive, but as a force that ensures the perpetuation of human life. Of course, as might be expected, such a view is anything but optimistic. Ferguson situates Hardy's short-story in the context of the nineteenth century debate over free will and determinism, with references to Darwin's theory of evolution,

Lord Kelvin's metaphor of the world as a machine, and the philosophical influence of Schopenhauer, Haldane, and Von Hartman, especially as regards Hardy's concept of the Immanent Will. The merry-go-round where Charles Raye is first attracted to Anna, as he sees her being whirled round and propelled up and down on a mechanical horse, provides the central metaphor of "mechanization": one might believe that Charles selecting Anna is an act of free will, but as the tale unfolds the "gaze of desire" turns out to be a biologically determined process ultimately leading to Anna's pregnancy, i.e. serving the interests of the species. The merry-go-round initiates the paradigm of "circulatory systems" followed by Hardy all along the short-story. Edith sending letters to Charles in Anna's name is a "machination" whereby she seems to be following her own desire and exerting her free will, but it is subordinate to the "animalistic" nature of her response to Charles, as she is sexually drawn to him. The narrator, as the "overseer" of the story (in Foucault's sense), seems to maintain a superior perspective, the analytical gaze of objectivity – but Hardy the writer can by no means control desire through writing.

12 **Phillip Mallett** too, in "'A woman's flush of triumph lit her eyes': Hardy, Darwin, and the Blush", situates the discussion on Hardy's novels in the context of contemporary science and philosophy. Mallet reads in parallel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, both published in 1872. Neither work could have influenced the other, but Darwin and Hardy agree on many points. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* provides a typology of the blush, whose various forms are also found in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Woodlanders*, *Desperate Remedies*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The central issue discussed by Mallett, with references to Darwin, but also Auguste Comte, G. H. Lewes, W. K. Clifford, etc., bears on the question of the relation between a human emotion and its physical manifestation, such as the blush, or the flush. A relation which Hardy, who was no philosopher but a poet and a novelist, condenses in the ambiguous preposition "of" when he writes that Elfride's "flush of triumph" lit her eyes. The crucial point made here chimes with a statement made by Havelok Ellis that Hardy was "only willing to recognize the psychical element in its physical correlative". Rather than probe into his characters' psychology, Hardy shows their physical response to the gaze of others. Unlike George Eliot or Henry James, Hardy seldom resorts to Free Indirect Discourse or introspection. Instead, he chooses to make his readers *see*.

13 **Fabienne Gaspari**'s "'Their glances met': Looks and Desire in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*" always keeps closely entwined the two strands that are under scrutiny in this volume: desire and the gaze. The gaze is first envisaged in Hillis Miller's perspective as the "energy" that initiates the "dance of desire" in which the protagonists find themselves carried along. Special attention is given to several scenes that start the "drama of fascination" between the characters. The minute textual analysis of the portrayal of Farfrae, in a narrative focalized by Elizabeth-Jane, highlights the pictorial quality of Hardy's text: the text makes us see "a frozen moment", as if the narrative were "suspended in time" and aspired to nothing but visibility. Here J. B. Bullen's analysis of the pictorialism of Hardy's prose comes in useful, as well as Liliane Louvel's theorizing on "the text that strives towards its being-an-image without ever achieving it" (Louvel 90). Windows illustrate that aspiration, both in the diegesis, where they function as mediators of the gaze, and in Hardy's writing, where they turn reality into images and serve the aspiration to the visual. Interestingly, the author also associates the pictorial with silence. "Books and looks": Elizabeth-Jane is a reader of both. Reduced to invisibility, she becomes one of the watchers from a distance, who read gazes and faces like written texts. At the

same time, Hardy makes her into a figure of the writer of the book we are reading ("like the evangelist who had to write it down", Hardy 1977, 139). The article ends with the lethal power of the gaze, as Lucetta dies from the shock of her encounter with her double.

14 **Jane Thomas**'s "The Abyss, the Image and the Turn" is fully consonant with the logic of this volume: at the core of the essay is the idea that the abolition of distance between a subject and the object of his desire threatens him/her with annihilation. The author offers us a careful reading of three poems: "The Voice", "Where the Picnic Was", "The Shadow on the Stone". The desiring subject is the "Expressive I" in the poems: "the spirit of the artist writer", embodied in the first-person narrative voice – a voice whose gender is undecidable, in a perspective that goes beyond the limitations of a biographical reading. J. Thomas focuses on the "Orphic turn" away from the object[1], whereby the "Expressive I" turns away from the abyss of the Real, "the realm of the unspeakable", and instead chooses the "compromised arena of language". As it ventures on the edge of the void – the "black nothing" around which the poems are constructed – the "I" comes dangerously close to "the dark abjection of death", but always keeps on the safe side, as the poem encircles the hole within its traceries. For such is the power of Hardy's poetry, which is essentially sublime (*sub-limen*): by attempting to express what cannot be represented, it takes us to the very limit, "the margin of the unexpressed" (Woolf[2]), but it also works as a barrier. A barrier which, however, is "semi-permeable": it lets through some of the unbearable plenitude which it keeps at bay. Indeed symbols work in a double way: they convey definite meaning, but reach far beyond as they bring a little "surplus" to the poet and the reader.

15 **Isabelle Gadoin**'s **"**Blank Letters and Ensnared Eyes in *Far From the Madding Crowd*" provides us with a reading of the Valentine scene which uses tools different from those handled by Annie Ramel. But though perspectives may be different, both articles show how Hardy's characters depart from regular forms of intersubjectivity. Gadoin points to a parody of communication between Bathsheba (the sender of the Valentine card) and Boldwood (the receiver), and thus to some dysfunctioning of linguistic exchanges. Whereas blanks normally play a fundamental part in communication, the card received by Boldwood is in itself a blank space, an unfathomable void, **"**the blank space of undecipherable ambiguity," which opens an unbridgeable gap between the protagonists. The letter as an unreadable text ceases to function as a linguistic sign, it is reduced to sheer visibility and turns into an eye-catcher. Thus the semiotic takes over from the linguistic. A mere object among other objects, the letter is no longer a text but becomes a material thing. Therein lies the originality of the article, which provides a reading of the *image* presented to us by Hardy's text, in its tragic magnificence: the vision of the snow-field set ablaze by the rising sun, which is also Boldwood's vision – for the focaliser of the scene (narrated in internal focalization) is Boldwood. The **"**intense pictoriality" of the description invites comparisons with paintings by Monet, and other French Impressionists, and we find ourselves at the very core of the question of **"**the expressive eye". The author leads us to read the blank space of the landscape—which is analogous to Bathsheba's blank letter – as another writing, outside language, which allows us to see what language cannot tell.

16 Thus we are led to understand how the art of the writer can turn to good account the power of the gaze: the gaze may be Medusean, it may be an "evil eye" which fascinates and spells disaster. Yet the power of the written word is, as Conrad wrote in the Preface to *The Nigger of the* Narcissus, to make you hear, to make you feel, and "before all, to make you *see*!" – especially in the case of an "iconotext" (Louvel). Then the written text, like a painting, can act as a "*dompte-regard*" (Lacan 1973, 109): a taming of the gaze, which causes the reader/viewer to lay down his gaze, while allowing him to open his eyes and attempt to see what cannot be scripted black on white.

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NOTES

1. The desired object may be “the object-gaze” or “the object-sound”.
2. The expression was first used by Virginia Woolf in her *Common Reader*, vol.2 (London: Hogarth Press, 1932), and later taken up by Roger Ebbatson as a title to his study on Hardy (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

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